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A Brief History of Banned Books in America

Attempts to restrict what kids in school can read are on the rise. But American book banning started with the Puritans, 140 years before the United States

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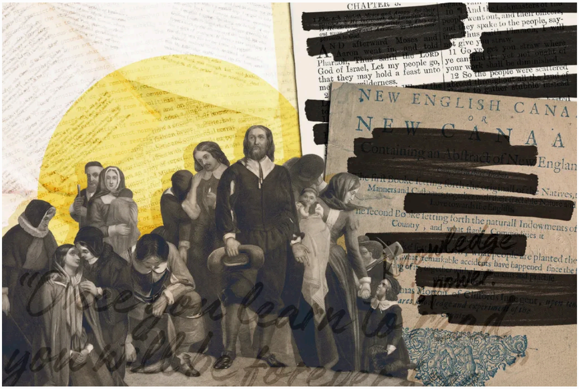

The *New English Canaan* by Thomas Morton criticized the Puritan government in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Illustration by Emily Lankiewicz

The American Library Association reports that 2022 saw more attempts to have books removed from schools and public libraries than in any prior year this century—indeed, it documented nearly twice as many attempted bans in 2022 than in 2021. Notably, the common thread in these aggressive efforts is the subject that binds the most-challenged titles: Most of them address themes of LGBT+ identity or gender expression.

On our latest episode of the Smithsonian *magazine podcast "There's More to That," I talk with journalist Colleen Connolly about Thomas Morton's* New English Canaan, *the first* *book ever to be suppressed in North America. What did the Puritans find so threatening about it, and how has this book echoed through subsequent centuries? Then I'm joined by Carla Hayden, the librarian of Congress, for a wide-ranging conversation about the history of book bans in the United States, how a resurgent wave of book bans in many states differs from those of prior eras and why organized attempts to prevent specific people from reading specific books usually fail.*

A transcript is below. To subscribe to "There's More to That" and listen to past episodes on J. Robert Oppenheimer, the vanishing Colorado River, the OceanGate Titan *disaster and more, find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.*

Chris Klimek: Dr. Carla Hayden is the librarian of Congress.

Carla Hayden: Because my mom is not listening, you can call me Carla. The librarian of Congress is the chief administrator for the world's largest library that serves Congress as well as the people that Congress serves. It's a collection that includes items of history, like the draft of the Declaration of Independence, but also musical instruments, films, recordings and all that.

Klimek: Carla has been a librarian for half a century. When it comes to book banning, she's seen it all. But her core philosophy is that readers should have access to as many titles as possible, even the materials they may not agree with.

Hayden: It's really the philosophy of the library profession that free people should read freely and that there's a power in being able to select what you want to read. And sometimes it's essential to be able to have access to different topics, different points of views. And so we really believe strongly that people should have access as much as possible to materials that can help them in life to understand themselves and to understand others.

Klimek: Carla often laughs when she thinks about some of the books that have been subjects of controversy over the years.

Hayden: One, I had to smile because I remember, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, with menstruation and all that. That was like, "Oh my God, it's in print." But the one that is now seen as a classic and pretty tame was *Harriet the Spy* by Louise Fitzhugh.

She was unrepentant about spying. She was a kind of, not just quirky, but a little testy, little something. And they thought, "Oh my goodness, this is not a good role model for kids." But we all knew a kid or two like that, and some of us were, maybe, and now that seems old-fashioned. "Oh, that's what you're doing. You didn't even have social media."

Klimek: This episode is being released right in the middle of Banned Books Week in America. The American Library Association has put on this event every year since 1982 as a kind of corrective, but in recent years, things have picked up. More books are being contested; there are more aggressive efforts to ban multiple books at once. And, as Carla told us, the types of books causing controversy have changed.

Hayden: What has been interesting to see is the counterproposals where people are saying, "No, we want to read these books" or "We want our young people to have access to these books." And there even have been underground railroads for these banned books. One of the surest ways—I think most people listening will know—if you tell young people what they can't do, especially if they can't read something, their first instinct is, "I want to see what's in this book."

Klimek: From *Smithsonian* magazine and PRX Productions, this is "There's More to That," the show where things that are old sometimes become new again. On this week's episode, we learned about the first book ever to be banned in America and what it has to do with the book bans we're seeing today. I'm Chris Klimek—let's dive in.

Colleen Connolly: So *New English Canaan*, it's a book that was published in 1637, so that's almost 400 years ago.

Klimek: Colleen Connolly recently wrote a piece for *Smithsonian* about *New English Canaan*, the first book to be banned in what is now the United States of America. Colleen spoke to us from her home office, where the birds outside her window were quite active.

Connolly: There's the sound right now, so I apologize for the bird noises.

Klimek: Oh, no, don't apologize. I'm finding it quite soothing.

Connolly: It's really relaxing, I'm not going to lie.

Klimek: What is *New English Canaan* about?

Connolly: It's a three-volume book written by a guy named Thomas Morton, so it's part ethnography. He writes a lot about the Indigenous peoples of New England at that time. He writes about flora and the fauna and what goods might be available to sell back in England. But at the end, he also is quite critical of the Puritans, and I think this is probably the part that's most interesting. He is a colonist as well, but he has a totally different idea of what the colonies should look like, and so he criticizes them pretty heavily, and subsequently they ban his book and they exile him.

Klimek: So who was Thomas Morton?

Connolly: He was a colonist. He had ambitions to go to the New World, as many did in that day, and wanted to maybe establish a colony of his own. He also, I think, had a huge personality that may have been a turnoff to a lot of people, including the Puritans. He liked to party, it seemed—probably the most famous thing about Thomas Morton was that he did this pagan ritual where he had a maypole and he invited the Native Americans and they all kind of danced around and drank and whatever. And the Puritans put a stop to that. They arrested him and took down the maypole. And that's sort of the scene that endures about Thomas Morton.

Klimek: We've all seen *Footloose*, we know what happens when you try to bring dancing to a religious community. What does he say about the Puritans that makes them want to suppress the book?

Connolly: He's pretty critical of their strict society, and he's also pretty pointed about how he sees their treatment of Native Americans. He sees it as pretty unjust. He imagined a society where they were a bit more intermingled and the Native Americans were part of the colonist society. To be fair, again, he's a colonist as well, so you can argue about how good he really was. But they probably would have seen just a threat to their existence. They were trying to survive; they didn't know the terrain as well. And someone like Thomas Morton comes along, and he is more friendly with the Native Americans. He actually trades guns to them, and then he criticizes the Puritan approach. The whole idea, I think, to them is just a threat to their survival. He was exiled after he wrote the book, but he came back, so they put him on an island somewhere and Native Americans helped him get off. And he ended up coming back and was exiled a second time. And so this is a guy who just seems not to go away.

Klimek: Is there anything more that we know about Morton prior to his arrival in North America?

Connolly: Yeah, we know he arrives, I believe it's sometime in the 1620s. He wants to revoke the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter and establish his own colony, and he doesn't quite succeed in that. He does manage to establish a colony of his own that he calls Merrymount. I don't think it lasted for very long, but people have described as sort of like a utopia. So it was supposedly more egalitarian, with Native Americans and colonists combining religious and spiritual beliefs of everyone. Didn't necessarily have one main leader, but again, he was up against the Puritan society.

Klimek: Do you know where the idea of actually banning the book came from? Were the Puritans already in the habit of suppressing other activities or media, or was this truly new?

Connolly: I think there's not a ton of information on what are all the books they banned, but we do know that they were just pretty strict in general. There was an environment of suppression. As one of my sources told me, it's likely that they just didn't allow a lot in to begin with. So they didn't have to ban it, they just didn't print it and they didn't allow it in. It's not like today where we have social media and things, and media is just much more accessible. Back then it was just like: Our printing press is not going to print that. So they probably destroyed copies that they had. To this day, I think of the original printings, I think there's fewer than 30 left.

Klimek: Wow.

Connolly: Yeah. I'm not entirely sure if they burned them or whatever, but I think they probably destroyed.

Klimek: Is there anything just about the very idea of colonization that we can take away from this?

Connolly: Yeah, definitely. I think probably the biggest takeaway is that this time was pretty contested. It wasn't just one group of people who came over and had an idea and more or less succeeded. It wasn't necessarily going to work out that way. And there were a lot of people who kind of disagreed on how the colonies should be. And I think that part of it is what's gotten lost in history. We may tell a very different story about Thanksgiving or the founding of the United States. Had things gone differently, had someone like Thomas Morton had more success or the Puritans decided not to stay, it wasn't the inevitable story that we often tell today.

Klimek: So how does this connect to our prized idea of free speech? Is there any connection we can make there between this episode and this lasting part of our national identity?

Connolly: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think it shows that while we say free speech was something, as you say, a bedrock or a foundation of this country, it sort of shows that it wasn't and still isn't. There's always people who disagree with the status quo. And throughout history, you see examples of book bans and other kinds of censorship, and they really tell us about what people are afraid of. For this story, I spoke to Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, who's the director of the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, and she compared it to even James Baldwin. People have also banned him, and she says it's not just as a Black man, as a gay man. And she said, "A lot of it seems to come down to these kind of ethnicity and identity questions." And so while Morton was an English guy, he was seen as friendly with the Native Americans, and his book was banned. As she said, it's sort of a bit of a through line through these last 400 years.

Klimek: So where has this 400-year-old book echoed in the subsequent centuries? Where might we have encountered it or discussion of it?

Connolly: Yeah. This is an interesting journey of the book. The book does survive, and so for a while, Morton is just kind of made fun of. He's seen as sort of like a comic foil sometimes in other writings; not much is made of his book. But in the 1800s, Nathaniel Hawthorne actually writes a short story about him and the maypole, and he actually paints Thomas Morton in a better light. And that becomes a turning point, not just for Morton and his legacy, but also for the book. And in the same century, John Adams' family and his descendants, a former president, they had a copy of this book, and they're interested in the history of early America. And they've also become interested in the book, less because they care about Morton and more because there's information in there that's maybe not found elsewhere, and they want to know: What were the colonies like?

And as I said, a lot of this book is kind of an ethnography, so it does provide a lot of historical information. It gets a bit more prestige from that. And then if we go until the 1900s, it's picked up again, this time by the beatnik crowd. They saw this Thomas Morton as a rebel against the Puritans, and these are people who are rebels against the current authority. It's pretty divorced from the context of the time, but he becomes an anti-authoritarian symbol all the way in 2001. Philip Roth actually writes about Morton, and it sort of comes from the same spirit as the beatniks, I think. I think he writes that it should be his face on Mount Rushmore and not the others. And so it's seeing him as anti-authoritarian, better than our Puritan founders. We've taken a completely different view in the last 50 years of colonization, right? It's not so rosy anymore, and so Morton becomes a symbol of that.

Klimek: Thank you for this conversation.

Connolly: Thank you so much.

Carla Hayden: There's always been an effort to restrict what certain people could read. To open up your mind to different ideas is somewhat threatening at different points in history for different groups.

Klimek: Dr. Carla Hayden, the librarian of Congress from the top of the episode, told us that *New English Canaan* shares a legacy with one of the world's most popular texts: the Bible. Slave holders in early America withheld access to the Bible, not wanting enslaved people to read, for instance, the story of the Exodus, when Moses led enslaved people to freedom.

Hayden: A book that has those kind of pesky types of things, like, "Let my people go." Well, I've had experience with looking into that, and because I'm African American and also a librarian. So that aspect of restricting the ability to read and then what slaves read. You couldn't just look at Frederick Douglass' autobiography when he talks, when his "master" found out that his "mistress" was teaching him to read. He said, "If you let him read, he'll be restless. He won't be satisfied with his condition." And so when you think about some of the things, Exodus, all of the things that are in the Bible that might negate what a person has experienced as a slave, and that they would get strength from reading and inspiration. People that wanted to keep those peculiar institutions in place would not want the people who were enslaved to be inspired and to gain any strength from reading, so it had to be restricted.

Klimek: How are the book bans that we're seeing today different from the ones that were happening earlier in your career?

Hayden: They seem to be more targeted to certain types of materials. Before, we've had attempts at banning books or restricting access to books that covered a wide range, from *Harry Potter* to *Huckleberry Finn*. Even in the history of libraries, comic books weren't looked upon kindly. And even before that, when they called them "romance novels" or things in the 1890s, you wouldn't have that type of thing, because they thought that would give women kind of strange ideas. Romance, huh, that's not what marriage is about. So there've been all of these types of things.

And what's happening now, that seems to be very targeted to certain types of materials. It's not as broad-based, and it seems to be tied to broader cultural and political movements and much more organized than it was before. It's an interesting time with efforts at censorship. There are groups that don't want, for instance, your children to know about or even think that they are part of, because you are objecting to a particular culture or lifestyle.

One that really struck home for me in terms of my own family, my mom talks about when she was growing up, when they went to school, they didn't have any African American history. She's almost 92 now, and the only time African Americans were mentioned was during the part of the curriculum that talked about slavery. And the African American children wanted to stay home, because that was the only time that people that looked like them or their ancestors were mentioned. And so not teaching African American history or the reason why Rosa Parks had the incident on the bus was because of racism. And that, by bringing that point out, would make a young person of today feel badly that their ancestors had been the oppressors was very ironic for my mom as she's hearing all of this now. Because, she said, "Well, people didn't care what we felt when that history was being taught."

Klimek: Do people understand the books that they want to ban?

Hayden: Some people that challenge a book haven't even read it, and that's what's fascinating. They might actually like it if they read it, or they might realize, "Oh, there's something good about this." So it's easier, I would suppose, to not invest in reading a book but protesting what the book is about. And hearing what the book is about or what the flap on the side says it's about, or the review says it's about, than sitting down and reading 256 pages yourself. And seeing how you feel after you read it, that's a commitment.

Klimek: Yeah. Why do people keep trying this?

Hayden: I think people might not realize the power of the word telling the story, having access. Frederick Douglass famously said, "Once you learn to read, you'll be forever free." The power of reading. Early on, people understood slaves wanted to learn how to read. They knew that there was something in those books that people didn't want them to have.

Klimek: What about now? What's the broad motivation, you think, to withhold certain kinds of information from certain people?

Hayden: Information can be empowering. "Knowledge is power"—that's another phrase that you hear quite a bit, because if you understand something or you understand how things came to be, it's harder for other people to tell you something different. And then you might be able to challenge them and challenge, "No, this is how it happened. It wasn't because, for instance, people were inferior or anything like that, or it wasn't this, it was that. Here's what really happened. Here's a fact. Here's something that is true misinformation." There's a lot of talk about that. Now, I'm going to teach you in library school that you look at the source, who's telling you this? What's an authoritative source of information?

Klimek: And one of the professions most affected by all of this are librarians. How is this affecting librarians across the country?

Hayden: Well, librarians, we have mugs and T-shirts that say, "Librarians, the original search engines." So we've been involved with information and the internet since it's really been widely available, because that was another way for us to provide information to people, health information, all types of things. And so librarians have been at the forefront of looking at: What are some of the safeguards? How can we be better prepared to be those guides on the side when they're surfing? People still use public libraries, for instance, as one of their major sources of health information.

Klimek: Yeah, that's something that I hadn't thought of, this idea that yes, now anyone with internet access has access to all of this information of widely varying quality. But the librarians can still help us sort the legitimate stuff from the cynical and fabricated stuff. That media literacy seems critical.

Hayden: "Information literacy" is the term that we use, and it's really that same thing, but also in this new world. And that's going to be even more of an aspect when you think about artificial intelligence.

Klimek: Oh, boy.

Hayden: People are worried about that. So that's a whole new area to think about. So it's an exciting time, though, to be in the library profession. So I'm recruiting on your broadcast here.

Klimek: OK, yes. Are there any current news stories or current bans or current books or anything that you're watching now as kind of an indicator of where this is going to go?

Hayden: The books about sexual identity have seemed to be targeted the most recently. And that is concerning in many ways, because when you think about those young adults or young people who are grappling with all types of things in their lives, let's say. And to be able to have access to materials that now are being produced, because just like Judy Blume was at the forefront with certain things that she talked about, and it was like, "Oh my gosh, thank you." Here's a book you can give a young person about that.

Especially librarians, we knew that sometimes we were the only adults in some of the young people's lives that could suss out a little bit or try this or think about this or that. We were these trusted people in young people's lives, too. When I think about being a young adult librarian in the '70s like I was, I would've loved to have had a lot of the materials that are available now. Just so many things that just … There's a book about everything, just every situation, just about. A children's book, and that's so helpful. I've had parents that I even work with, it just makes such a difference when you can share a book with a young person.

Klimek: What would you say to parents who are living in areas or in school districts where book banning is happening in a very aggressive way? And they want their kids to have full access to the full spectrum of information, and how do they navigate that hurdle?

Hayden: Different people have different levels of being comfortable with going to a school board meeting or going to a library board meeting. But it certainly is helpful when you have other voices at those meetings, when these types of things are being discussed, to say, "I want my child to read freely." Or, "I want to be able to decide with my child and in my household what my child could read. And I want my tax dollars to offer a broad range." And so being able to be part of the discussion helps the school librarians and the public librarians, when you say that it's not just one point of view, we need that.

Klimek: Carla, this has been a lovely, revealing conversation. Thank you so much.

Hayden: Well, thank you.

Klimek: To read Colleen Connolly's article about *New English Canaan*, go to SmithsonianMag.com. We also have a link to it in our show notes, as well as more information about Banned Books Week. We like to end each episode with a dinner party fact—this is a little extra bite of info to pull out when the conversation turns as cold as leftover pizza. This week's dinner party fact is about a type of bean, but not one that you'd eat.

Tracy Scott Forson: I'm Tracy Scott Forson, a senior editor with *Smithsonian* magazine, and here's my dinner party fact. Chicago's most famous example of public art, "The Bean," isn't officially called that at all. Its real name is *Cloud Gate*, and the British artist behind it, Anish Kapoor, gave it that name because the sculpture's mirrored surface reflects the sky. We profile Kapoor's career as a groundbreaking artist and get a sneak peek at his newest paintings in our November issue. Oh, and don't worry, Kapoor admitted that he himself has taken to calling his Chicago attraction "The Bean" too.

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I'm Chris Klimek, thanks for listening.

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